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Companion and Series Books: Invitations for Many Happy Returns

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Companion and Series Books: Invitations for Many Happy Returns

by Terrell A. Young, Ed.D. & Barbara A. Ward, Ph.D.

Repeated generations have delighted in the multiple books in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. These readers are not alone in their desire to know more about the many worlds and minor characters created by authors past and present. Those unwilling or unable to let go of a character or a time period have surely been pleased with the abundance of companion books published recently as they seem to have exploded in popularity.

The trend may have received a boost when the ever-popular Esmé Raji Codell wrote *Vive le Paris* (2006), which was marketed as a companion book to the earlier *Sahara Special* (2003). Set during the same time period, both books involved many of the same characters—students in Ms. Poitier's fifth-grade classroom in inner-city Chicago. Although many consider books about similar topics to be companion books, for our purposes we have defined them as books written by the same author about the same characters, but the books stand on their own. For instance, a reader can enjoy Richard Peck's companion book, *A Season of Gifts* (2009), without having read either of his previous books featuring Grandma Dowdel, *A Year Down Yonder* (2000) and *A Long Way from Chicago* (1998). While having read the previous titles might provide insight into the character of Grandma Dowdel, unlike the 39 Clues series, a reader can pick up *A Season of Gifts* and enjoy the story on its own merits without necessarily reading the earlier books.

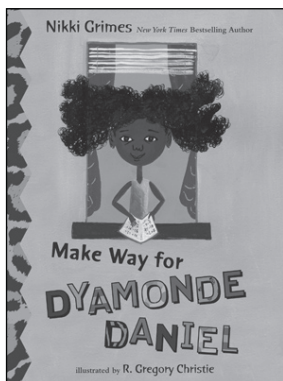
Readers turn to companion books for many reasons, such as their familiar format, settings, situations, language, style, and characters. "Readers form connections with characters, and they want to stay with them. An annual book is like an annual visit from an old friend. That may be even stronger with teens," writes Kelley Armstrong, author of *Bitten* (cited in Rentilly, 2009, p. 36). McGill-Franzen and Botzakis (2009) note that the redundant language in companion books "supports inexperienced readers. Many particular words and phrases are constantly repeated, providing the needed practice that leads to automaticity" (p. 111).

Another value of such books is the social interaction that surrounds them. The beginning of the 21st century witnessed the Harry Potter phenomena that had just about everyone talking about the boy wizard and his adventures and waiting for the next book to arrive. More recently tweens, teens, and adults donned t-shirts identifying themselves as members of Team Edward or Team Jacob in response to Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series. Researchers have noted that the sense of belonging to a group and the talk that surrounds the discussion of such books promotes reading comprehension, engagement, and identity (McRae & Guthrie, 2009).

Likewise, series books are very popular with young readers. Many have noted that series books keep students reading. "Not only do series books sustain a narrative over many pages of text, they also sustain student involvement over multiple books" (McRae & Guthrie, 2009, p. 111). Allowing students to read what they like is important even if their choices are what their teachers might refer to as "light reading" as such reading has many academic and affective benefits for students. There is evidence that light reading "promotes fluent reading and vocabulary development, leads to better attitudes toward reading, helps develop the linguistic competence necessary for reading more difficult materials, and typically gives students the competence and drive to read more sophisticated materials" (Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999, p. 24).

Below we share some of our favorite companion and series books. We hope you will enjoy reading and possibly return to these literary companions, some familiar, some not so well known, as much as we did.

Early Grades



Grimes, Nikki. (2009).

Make way for Dyamonde Daniel.

Illustrated by R. Gregory Christie.

New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. 74 pages, \$10.99,

ISBN: 978-0-399-25175-7

Supremely confident third grader Dyamonde Daniel lets nothing get in her way—not being the new girl in school, not meeting a grouchy classmate named Free, not even her parents' divorce that prompted her mother's move to a new place. She loves numbers, especially even ones, instead of English because numbers

are dependable and not constantly changing like the confusing rules in English. With her dazzling personality and can-do attitude, Dyamonde is sure to inspire other youngsters to look for the brighter sides to challenging situations. In the second book in this series, *Rich: A Dyamonde Daniel Book* (2009), Grimes tackles homelessness and writing with sensitivity and respect. Young readers and adults will clamor for more of this heroine with her irrepressible hair and personality. The illustrations fit Dyamonde and her classmates perfectly.

O'Connor, Jane. (2009).

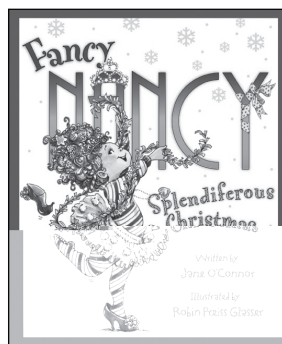
Fancy Nancy: Splendiferous Christmas.

Illustrated by Robin Preiss Glasser.

New York: HarperCollins. 32 pages, \$17.99,

ISBN: 978-0-061-23590-0

Fancy Nancy fans will want to add *Fancy Nancy: Splendiferous Christmas* to their collections as Nancy finds the holidays a perfect time for lots of fancy activities. In this endearing story, her grandmother comes to her aid when a fight with a dog results in a toppled Christmas tree and her special tree topper is broken. As in previous books such as *Fancy Nancy Sees Stars* (2008) and *Fancy Nancy's Favorite Fancy Words: From Accessories to Zany* (2008), young children—and their parents—will delight in Nancy's daily theatrics and fancy vocabulary.



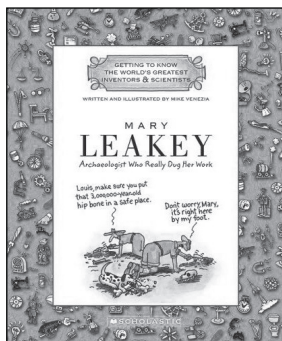
Venezia, Mike. (2009).

Mary Leakey: Archaeologist who really dug her work.

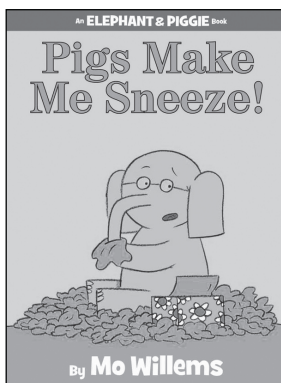
New York: Children's Press/Scholastic. 32 pages, \$28.00,

ISBN: 978-0-531-23727-4

History and its famous figures are cast in a humorous yet informative light in this introduction to the childhood and lifework of a scientist laboring in a specialized field. In simple yet engaging text, the book introduces young readers to archaeologist Mary Leakey, whose fossil discoveries changed the world of paleontology. As with the other books in this series titled "Getting to Know the World's Greatest Inventors and Scientists," Venezia includes carefully selected photographs that show the scientist at work in Africa as well as cartoons that poke fun at the serious nature of science. Readers will quickly recognize the unique book covers of this series featuring various tools of the scientific trade and will also want to read *Alexander Graham Bell: Setting the Tone for Communication* (2008),



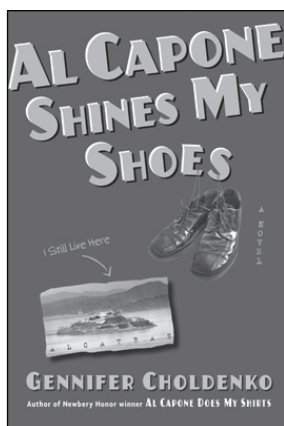
Luis Alvarez: *Wild Idea Man* (2009), Marie Curie: *Scientist Who Made Glowing Discoveries* (2009), and Rachel Carson: *Clearing the Way for Environmental Protection* (2010).



Willems, Mo. (2009). *Pigs make me sneeze!*
New York: Hyperion. 64 pages, \$8.99,
ISBN: 978-1-4231-1411-6).

Pigs Make Me Sneeze! is Mo Willems' 10th book featuring the dynamic Gerald and Piggie. When Gerald keeps sneezing, he decides he must be allergic to pigs and may have to stay away from his good friend Piggie forever. Later, Dr. Cat assures Gerald that his excessive sneezes are due to a cold. Readers will see that the pair shares more than friendship when Gerald tells Piggie the good news. As in the previous books, Willems utilizes speech balloons and expressive illustrations to tell funny, but touching stories of friendship for an early reader audience. Two of the Elephant & Piggie books, *There Is a Bird on Your Head!* (2007) and *Are You Ready to Play Outside?* (2008), have been honored with the Theodore Seuss Geisel Medal, making Willems's books perfect choices for beginning readers.

Middle Grades



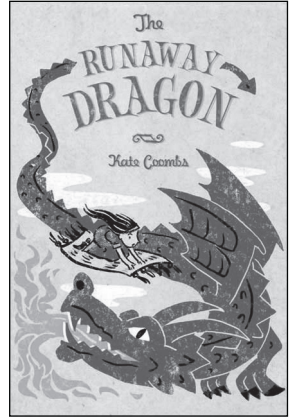
Choldenko, Jennifer. (2009).
Al Capone shines my shoes.
New York: Dial. 288 pages, \$16.99,
ISBN: 978-0-803-73460-9.

Set in 1935, the Newbery Honor-winning *Al Capone Does My Shirts* (2004), introduces 12-year-old Moose Flanagan who, with his family, moves to Alcatraz so his father can work as a prison guard and, Natalie, his younger sister with autism, can attend a special school in San Francisco. In this book, Moose appeals to the famous gangster to aid in Natalie's admission to the school. In *Al Capone Shines My Shoes* Moose learns that help from criminals often comes at a high cost. Fortunately, he and his friends are able to thwart what would have been a huge

escape by Alcatraz prisoners while his sister Natalie's visit to the Rock could have made her an unsuspecting accomplice to the crime. Through the adventure, Moose discovers how important family and friends really are, and that the line between good and bad is much clearer than he previously thought.

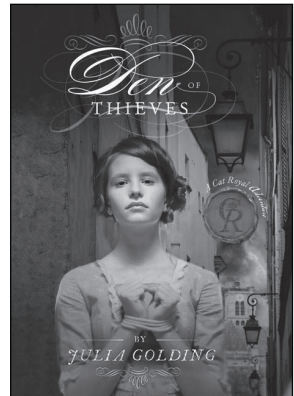
Coombs, Kate. (2009). *The runaway dragon*.
New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 292 pages, \$16.99,
ISBN: 978-0-374-36361-1.

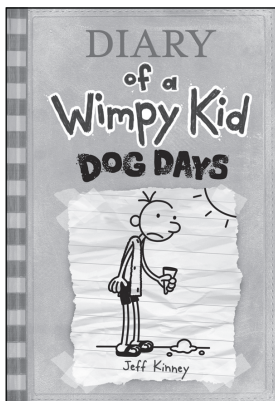
Left alone for far too long, Meg's once diminutive dragon Laddy has grown enormous and decides to leave home to seek adventure and attention, and a concerned Meg gathers her friends to bring him back home. Meg knows a thing or two about being lonely since her father, the King of Greeve, once imprisoned her in a tower to force her to participate in his ill-conceived plan to auction her off to the highest bidder. Princes from everywhere sought her hand, but Meg remained true to herself and rejected them all in an earlier title *The Runaway Princess* (2006). On this new journey, she meets several strangers and relies on friends Dilly, Cam, and Lex to recover her dragon and parts of herself she seems to have lost.



Golding, Julia. (2009). *Den of thieves*.
New York: Roaring Brook Press. 420 pages, \$16.95,
ISBN: 978-1-59643-444-8.

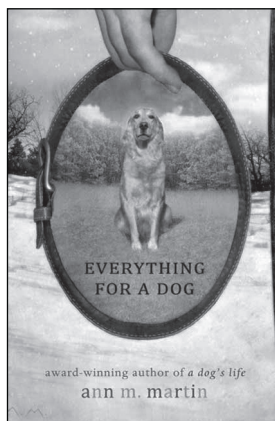
When the Theater Royal in London is closed for repairs, Cat is left with nowhere to go. She falls in with a publisher who prints her manuscripts detailing her adventures but fails to pay her. Worried about Cat, friends of the plucky 13-year rescue her and send her off to France where she witnesses the French Revolution. In addition to all the excitement and personal experience with historical events, Cat's story also provides insight into the economic challenges faced by the lower classes in Paris and London. Readers who first admired Cat in *The Diamond of Drury Lane* (2008) and *Cat Among the Pigeons* (2008) won't be disappointed in this third visit to the 18th century world of the feisty heroine. Cat's pluckiness and street smarts serve her well as she navigates a completely different world from her familiar theater district.





Kinney, Jeff. (2009). *Diary of a wimpy kid: Dog days*. New York: Amulet. 224 pages. \$13.95, ISBN 978-0-8109-8391-5.

In the fifth title – if you include the how-to-tell-your-own-life-story *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Do It Yourself Book* (2008) – protagonist Greg Heffley is up to his usual tricks, trying to outmaneuver his equally wily Mom. After all, it's summer, and all students long for the freedom to enjoy the great outdoors, right? Not Greg, who pulls his window shades and plans to spend the summer indoors playing video games. But Greg and his mother clash because her summer plans call for much family togetherness. Kinney continues to deliver the wry humor and simple drawings that persist throughout this series, guaranteeing that middle graders will have something to read and recommend to their friends. School libraries haven't been the same since the publication of the first title in this series, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (2007).



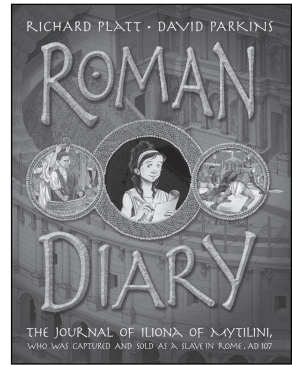
Martin, Ann M. (2009). *Everything for a dog*. New York: Feiwel and Friends. 224 pages, \$16.99, ISBN: 978-0-3123-8651-1.

In Martin's *A Dog's Life: Autobiography of a Stray* (2005) readers were introduced to Bone, who was separated from his sister when they were puppies. In *Everything for a Dog*, Martin deftly weaves three story lines into a satisfying and heartwarming story narrated by Bone. One thread follows Bone and the changes in his life as he goes from stray to a beloved member of a family. Later he is passed on to someone else and eventually abandoned again. Another strand features Henry, a boy who wanted a dog more than anything else, but for some reason unbeknownst to him his parents will not allow him to have one. The final strand is about Charlie who, along with his family and community, grieves over the death of his brother, RJ. His brother's pet dog helps Charlie deal with his loss before another tragedy strikes.

Platt, Richard. (2009). *Roman diary: The journal of Iliona of Mytilini, who was captured and sold as a slave in Rome, AD 107.*

Illustrated by David Parkins. Somerville, MA: Candlewick. 64 pages, \$18.99, ISBN 978-0-7636-3480-3.

This oversize book purports to be the diary of a Greek girl, Iliona, who is captured by pirates while on a voyage with her parents. Taken to Rome, she and her brother Apollo become the property of others, and readers are treated to a view of Rome through her eyes. Although the author puts a decidedly positive spin on enslavement, readers will enjoy sharing her surprise at the treats and horrors Rome has to offer as she visits the baths, the Colliseum, the Senate, and various building sites. This title joins the equally interesting earlier titles in providing insight into a long gone time: *Castle Diary: The Journal of Tobias Burgess* (1999), *Pirate Diary: The Journal of Jake Carpenter* (2001), and *Egyptian Diary: The Journal of Nakht* (2005).

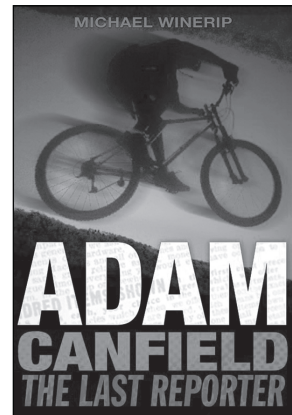


Winerip, Michael. (2009).

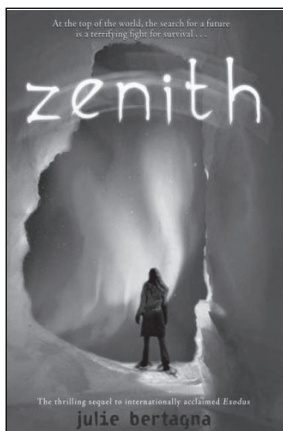
Adam Canfield: The last reporter.

New York: Candlewick Press. 348 pages, \$16.99, ISBN: 978-0-76362-342-5.

Adam Canfield, his coeditor/friend Jennifer, and their star reporters are on to some red-hot leads — including a rigged school election, a bike-theft ring, and suspect test scores. This time, however, they have a huge problem. The Harris Elementary/Middle School's student monthly paper, the *Slash*, has been shut down for exposing a prominent family's activities. Now Adam and his team must find another way to publish these stories. As in *Adam Canfield and the Slash* (2005) and *Adam Canfield, Watch Your Back* (2007), the truth must come forward. This book adds a budding romance to the action-packed, humorous adventures found in the previous books.



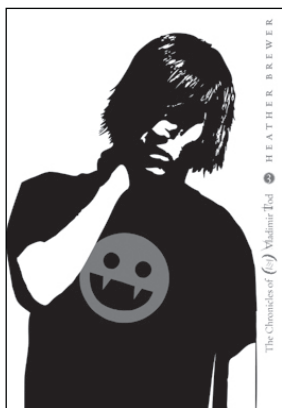
Upper Grades



Bertagna, Julie. (2009). *Zenith*.
New York: Walker. 352 pages, \$16.99,
ISBN: 978-0-8027-9803-9.

Things are no better on the water-logged Earth than they were when readers first met the determined Mara, who led an expedition from her island home in an attempt to find land. Mara continues her quest to find a home and a way to survive in this gripping continuation to last year's *Exodus* (2008). As she leads a group of refugees north from New Mungo, it isn't clear how much of the Earth's landmass has been submerged, and how likely the possibility of a landfall exists. Readers will be intrigued by the courage of this

brave 16-year-old as well as fascinated by Fox, her counterpart in the first book, and a new acquaintance who adds all sorts of complications to Mara's story. Although some of the same characters and elements from the first book are featured, the author also introduces a group of humans trying to survive by clinging to caves closed by automobile doors they have gleaned from the sea. The separation of Fox and Mara becomes especially acute as a child is born. Readers will turn the book's pages desperately to find out what happens to Mara and look for hints about the final title in this end-of-the-world trilogy.



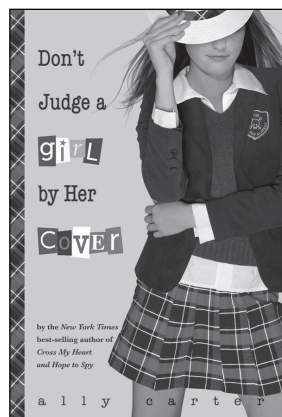
Brewer, Heather. (2009). *Tenth grade bleeds*.
New York: Dutton. 292 pages, \$16.99,
ISBN: 978-0525421351.

With the fate of the world resting on his slender shoulders, teen bloodsucker Vlad tries to adjust to the idea that he really is the Prauvus. Being a vampire, especially an important vampire, in the tenth grade isn't all it's cracked up to be. Vlad must contend with those who would reveal his secret, and even worse, he must figure out what to do about the crush he has on a girl at school. Brewer dishes out the horror with plenty of humor, and the characters and plots continue to

hold readers' attention. If the storyline featuring the vampire first encountered in *Eighth Grade Bites* (2007), *Ninth Grade Slays* (2008), and now in this newest addition is growing increasingly improbable, it is also great fun, and dare we say, provides books that you can sink your teeth into.

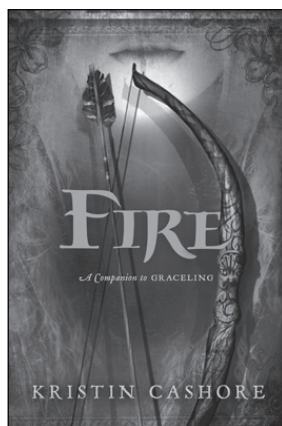
Carter, Allie. (2009). *Don't judge a girl by her cover*. New York: Hyperion. 272 pages, \$16.99, ISBN: 978-1423116387

For Gallagher Girls, the cover is the key to having a seemingly normal life while also maintaining one's identity as a spy. Girls at the elite Gallagher's Academy for Excellent Young Women take classes in covert operations, protection, and enforcement, and there are pop quizzes to determine their mastery of the material upon which lives will later depend. In this, the third title of the engaging series, Cammie Morgan (also known as the Chameleon for her ability to blend into surroundings) prevents a rooftop kidnapping during a national political convention. Her roommate Macey McHenry had invited Cammie to Boston for the event as her father prepares to accept the vice presidential nomination. But a spy-in-training is never off duty, of course, and Cammie and Macey put their skills and instincts to the test during the attempted kidnapping. This series with its clever titles, interesting family dynamics, and strong female characters that are much more than pretty faces, gently pokes fun of the stereotyped expectations many have about finishing schools. In this case, while the girls are certainly privileged and well-connected, their teachers also have secrets and their own covers. Cammie's friends, Liz and Bex, once again prove their loyalty and aptitude for the world of spies. Fans of the earlier titles in this series, *I'd Tell You I Love You, But Then I'd Have to Kill You* (2006) and *Cross My Heart and Hope to Spy* (2007) will chortle at the misdeeds of Cammie and company but also feel her pain as she struggles with the two confusing men in her life and with her own mother's choices.



Cashore, Kristen. (2009). *Fire*. New York: Dial Books. 464 pages, \$17.99, ISBN 978-0-8037-3461-6.

Fans of the incredibly imaginative *Graceling* (2008) are sure to enjoy this latest offering from the creative mind of its author. A companion book to the other title, this one explores the Dells and provides the background behind the chilling powers of Leck who somehow uses his extensive powers of persuasion to control those around him. But interesting as Leck may be, his story pales next to the story of Fire, a woman whose beauty is so abundant that everyone who sees



her desires her. Even the insects and birds of the air attack her when she ventures forth, and she must hide her beauty under weighty wrappings. Fire is also heavily burdened by her ability to read and control the thoughts of those around her and filled with guilt over the misdeeds of her father Cansrel. The characters, setting, and plot are fully realized, and more than a reader or two will fall in love with the dashing and noble Brigan who leads the king's forces against incredible odds. There is almost limitless territory to explore in the world Cashore has created, and her fans long to read her next offering.



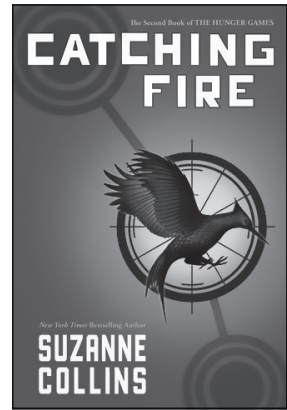
Childs, Tera Lynn. (2009). *Goddess boot camp*. New York: Dutton. 224 pages, \$16.99., ISBN 978-0-525-42134-4.

The fleet-of-foot Phoebe Castro continues to adjust to life as the descendant of a goddess, in her case, great-grandmother Nike, in this sequel to *Oh, My Gods*. (2008). Life on the Grecian island of Serfopoula grows even more complicated as Phoebe is sent to boot camp in order to learn how to control her goddess-given powers. If she cannot do so, she may end up being smote by the gods. Other than that small consideration and her concern that her boyfriend may be cheating on her, things are good for the California transplant. Tween and teen readers will enjoy the mystery that she must solve and appreciate her attempts to get along with her stepister, who may not be as horrible as she seemed in the first book. It's great fun to watch her navigate her way through this mythological-based world and the one with which she is familiar and have to adjust her plans. Phoebe's tongue is as swift as her feet, guaranteeing she will make more than a couple of missteps, and adding to readers' pleasure is the witty exchanges among the book's characters. Even her nemesis from the first book has more depth and evokes some sympathy, albeit briefly, from readers.

Collins, Suzanne. (2009). *Catching fire*. New York: Scholastic. 400 pages, \$17.99., ISBN 978-0-439-02349-8.

In the sequel to the much-loved *Hunger Games* (2008), life as a winner and champion of the games is disappointing to Katniss Everdeen. Although she and her fellow District 12 tribute Peeta survived everything the Capitol's games makers could throw at them, emerging victorious, she returns home to find that her best friend Gale now avoids her, and her fellow citizens treat her with fear. As she and

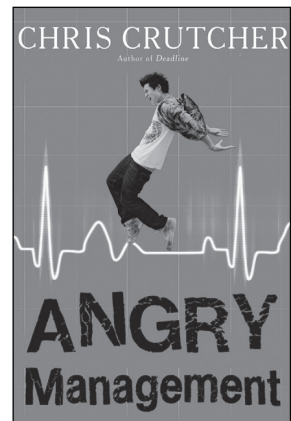
Peeta prepare for their Victory Tour, visits to each of the districts, and a visit from President Snow remind Katniss that her rebellious act during the Games did not go unnoticed and she will be punished. Katniss must prove that the love she and Peeta proclaimed for each other during the earlier games was real and not simply a heartstring-tugging performance to gain sympathy during the earlier Hunger Games. The twists, turns, and surprises for Katniss on the tour and afterward will not leave readers disappointed in this sequel. Katniss will need to rely on every bit of strength and shred of intelligence she has to survive what the Capitol has planned for her as, without knowing it, she has become



the symbol of a revolution that is sweeping through the districts. While part of her knows she must stop this rebellion, another part applauds its bravery and necessity. Assaulted on every side, doubting herself and everyone around her, Katniss once again relies on her instincts. But will that be enough? The author's careful weaving of bits of memories from her earlier time in the Arena adds poignancy to her plight. Readers will care deeply as the rules to this game to the death are changed, and wonder if anyone will be allowed to survive. Although Katniss reminds herself who the enemy is, distinguishing between friend and foe becomes increasingly difficult as all sorts of plots and intrigue emerge. Bring on the third one!

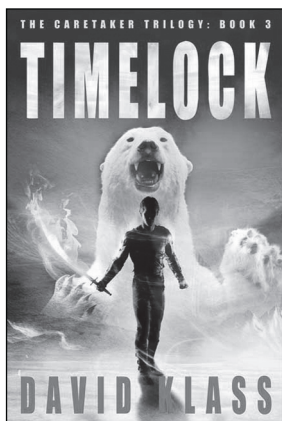
Crutcher, Chris. (2009). *Angry management*.
New York: Greenwillow Books. 256 pages, \$16.99, ISBN:
978-0-0605-0247-8.

Crutcher takes authorial license to have several of the characters from his previous books meet despite the fact that they lived at different times. The three stories in this collection are tied together by having the participants attend a group therapy session dubbed Angry Management by its leader, Noburu Nakatani, who brings them together to work out their issues. In the first story, the deeply wounded Sarah Byrnes from Crutcher's masterful *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*



(1993) takes a road trip with Angus Bethune to Las Vegas to meet her mother once again and discovers some disappointing and hurtful truths about the woman. The second story features Montana West, who faces censorship of the newspaper by the school administration and must decide who to believe and how far to push the

envelope. The third story circles around Marcus James, the only black gay student in a conservative Northwest high school. While all the stories do not have happy endings, their conclusions are satisfying in different ways, proving once again that Crutcher knows this territory and troubled teens very well.



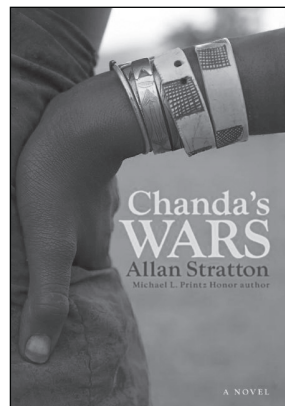
Klass, David. (2009). *Timeclock: The Caretaker Trilogy*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux. 256 pages, \$17.99, ISBN: 978-0374323097

Jack Danielson barely has time to breathe. Having lost his parents in a violent conflict, the smart and athletic teen was forced to leave behind everything he knew when assassins came after him. On the run, Jack then underwent intensive training to prepare him to save the world's oceans (*Firestorm*, 2007). Next he traveled to the Amazon and tried to prevent the logging of the their forests (*Whirlwind*, 2008). Just when Jack seems ready to put his role as eco-hero aside and return to the life of a typical teenager spending some quality time with his girlfriend, P.J., disaster strikes. Wrenched away from those he knows and loves and forced into unfamiliar places and situations, Jack travels through time to the fiery deserts of the future and the frozen tundra of the Arctic where he must fight improbable opponents including cyborgs, zombie warlocks, and tank-sized scorpions. But Jack is not alone in his battle since he has his two helpers introduced in the earlier books—a telepathic canine and a talented fighter, Eko. Jack finds himself in a race to save Earth as well as himself. As the trilogy's climax looms, Jack faces an impossible decision, choosing between two women who love him. What lies in store for this flawed hero? As in the earlier books, the pace is furious, and readers will truly care about what happens to the likeable Jack.

Stratton, Allan. (2008). *Chanda's wars*. New York: HarperTeen. 400 pages, \$17.99, ISBN: 978-0-060-87262-5.

Six months have passed since teenager Chanda lost her mother to AIDS in the riveting *Chanda's Secrets* (2004), and she tries hard to keep her word to her mother that she will keep her younger siblings safe. Having seen her mother die in isolation and fear, shunned by relatives and friends, Chanda knows the price paid by her mother and eventually agrees to visit her family in a far away village. Haunted by dreams filled with blood and a looming sense of danger, Chanda must risk her

own life and safety when rebels kidnap her brother and sister and take them into the bush to be child soldiers. The long-reaching effects of violence are particularly palpable in the behavior of her once-arrogant little sister, and readers will again find themselves rooting for this brave young woman and her family. The book was honored with the Canadian Library Association's Young Adult Book Award.



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